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WEEKEND BREAK



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The interior of St. Brendan the Navigator Orthodox Church in Astoria. The church features views of Youngs Bay and Saddle Mountain.

Parish finds a home in a historic Astoria church

By JAIME LUMP
For The Astorian

As light shines in from the floor-to-ceiling window on the southwest side of St. Brendan the Navigator Orthodox Church, Father Sergey Kakorin flips on some midcentury pendant lights made of colored glass.

Suddenly, the Astoria church's nave is filled with warmth amid a recent blustery day.

A bare wood ceiling above swoops up in an inverted arch, like two hands coming together for prayer. Glulam beams curve along the building's tongue-and-groove boards, appearing like a Viking ship setting sail toward Youngs Bay. It's a fitting design for a parish named after the patron saint of mariners and sailors.

St. Brendan the Navigator Orthodox Church came to the North Coast in 2012 as Holy Nativity Eastern Orthodox Mission from Kelso, Washington. But after much contemplation and prayer, the church changed the name of their parish in observance of its service to the local seafaring community. The new name was chosen as an ode to a saint known for his sea voyages to found monasteries and spread the gospel.

Weekly services for the parish were first held in the St. Francis de Sales church in Hammond. While the space worked well for worship, the parish yearned for a more permanent home. In 2018, one couple in the parish discovered a little green church covered in blue tarps and nestled in a pocket of Alameda Avenue. At the time, the church belonged to the First Congregational United Church of Christ.

Worshippers in the space date back to 1896, when a group of Finnish immigrants decided to organize an independent, nondenominational church that officially became the Astoria Finnish Evangelical Lutheran National Congregation. Soon, however, feelings of isolation began to grow from their independence. The church evolved into the Finnish Congregational Church, then later the First Congregational United Church of Christ. Their first building, constructed by 15 men who each donated a week of work, was located at 245 W. Exchange St. and was used by the congregation for over 50 years. When the aging Uniontown building became too much to maintain, the congregation decided to relocate. In 1954, church members acquired seven lots in the Astor Court area, across from Capt. Robert Gray School, and began to worship in a Craftsman style house. Ten years later, they were breaking ground for a new church designed by Brown & Brown Architects.

Ebba Wicks Brown was the daughter of prominent Astoria architect John Wicks, and was the first woman in Oregon registered as an architect in 1942. Her work can be found in a number of Astoria and seen at the Zion Lutheran Church, the Astoria Library and U.S. Bank, just to name a few. In her buildings, including this church, every detail is intentional, from pendant lighting to stunning views of Saddle Mountain.

The post-war trend of moving away from building neoclassical churches toward using more modern designs continued to prevail in the U.S. during the



A photo of the church when it housed the First Congregational United Church of Christ.

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LEARN MORE

To learn more about the parish, visit www.orthodox-astoria.org.

For details on the church building, Ebba Wicks Brown and midcentury modern architecture, visit the Lower Columbia Preservation Society's website, www.lcpsociety.org.

1960s, but architects were beginning to move away from the steel, glass and box shapes of midcentury modern churches and back toward the traditional.

The church, surrounded by trees and houses, still carries particular ecclesiastical motifs, yet lacks any intimidation by traditional architectural styles of city churches. It resembles a modern take on traditional Nordic designs with its simplicity and functionality. The southwest facade offers a high pitched gable roof that peaks at the top then swoops down into two curves leading to lower pitched eaves designed for bitter winds and rain.

In 2018, the St. Brendan parish knew they had

found their church. After signing a two year lease, its members got to work cleaning up a building that had suffered from dry rot, leaks and insect infestation. They replaced the roof, repaired and resealed a large chancel window in the nave, scrubbed floors and repainted walls. Upon purchasing the church in 2020, they began preparations to build and install their iconostasis, a wall of icons that will separate the nave from the sanctuary.

The parish's commitment to keeping a Nordic flair and celebrating the church's heritage remains evident in their renovations. Inspired by St. Brendan's ship, which was built from oak and tanned ox hides, the iconostasis will be constructed with leather straps and some oak pews left behind by the previous congregation.

Future visions for the church include turning the house behind the church, the same one brought over by the Finnish congregation, into a Sunday school, installing a new cross, and rebuilding a bell tower reminiscent of the original Brown & Brown design.

In January, Father Kakorin became the new priest to the parish and services are now available every weekend.